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ABSTRACT

H.R. 7, the Applied Technology Education Amendments of 1989, would reauthorize the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act through fiscal year 1995. Among other improvements, H.R. 7 strengthens support for personnel development, articulation, career guidance and counseling, consumer and homemaking education, and the national data system. However, H.R. 7 departs radically from the Perkins Act in some major strategies it has chosen to advance program improvement and improve access. Five strategic flaws in the proposal must be corrected before passage of final legislation. If federal legislation is to achieve the national objective of preparing an economically competitive work force, it must provide for (1) program improvement funds that are equitably distributed throughout the enterprise; (2) set-asides that reserve monies to enable students who cannot participate in regular programs to receive services that treat the conditions hindering their participation; (3) treating academic disadvantagement as a key variable in the funding formula; (4) strengthening state capacity to assist and guide local implementation of the law; and (5) national leadership and assistance from the U.S. Office of Vocational and Adult Education. (YLB)

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ISSUE PAPER

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Critical Issues in Reauthorization

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Decisions embodied in legislation reauthorizing the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act will affect the capacity of the vocational education enterprise to prepare skilled workers for years to come. The House of Representatives has now taken the first step on the long path to reauthorization with its passage of H.R. 7, the Applied Technology Education Amendments of 1989, which would reauthorize the Perkins Act through FY 1995.

H.R. 7 has a succinctly-stated economic purpose: "to make the United States more competitive in the world economy by developing more fully the academic and occupational skills of all segments of the population." It seeks to continue the two major thrusts embodied in the Perkins Act to achieve this economic purpose. These are, to improve vocational programs wherever improvement is required and to increase access to these programs by populations who typically can't participate because of handicaps or academic deficiencies.

H.R. 7 is excellent in many respects. It strengthens support for personnel development, articulation, career guidance and counseling, consumer and homemaking education, and the national data system to name only a few areas of improvement.

Yet H.R. 7 departs radically from the Perkins Act in some of the major strategies it has chosen to advance program improvement and improve access. There are changes proposed in this legislation which will not achieve the stated purpose and in fact will weaken the capacity of the vocational education enterprise to improve the productivity and competitiveness of the American workforce.

The following discussion focuses on five strategic flaws in the House proposal that we must seek to have corrected before passage of final legislation.

Strategic Flaw #1: Program Improvement

The Perkins Act and earlier vocational legislation provided federal tax dollars to improve programs across the board because the capacity of the entire vocational education enterprise is essential to produce qualified entry-level workers throughout the nation. Yet H.R. 7, despite its broadly stated purpose of making the United States more competitive, takes a very narrow approach to program improvement. It targets program improvement funds on a very specific segment of the enterprise: the neediest school districts and the neediest schools in those districts. For example, for programs at the secondary (and postsecondary level), it would distribute 80 percent of the basic state grant to school districts and institutions by a formula weighted 70 percent by a poverty factor, 20 percent by a handicapped students factor, and 10 percent by general enrollment.

If the federal goal is to improve a system which serves 20 million students, with institutions virtually within 50 miles of every citizen in America and with expenditures currently totalling $12 billion a year, it cannot be reached by so narrowly focusing the federal funds only to poor schools. By contrast, the current Perkins Act allows states to improve vocational programs wherever they need improvement.

To be sure, strenuous efforts must be made to improve vocational education programs serving students in districts trapped in the web of poverty. But H.R. 7, in doing this almost exclusively, forsakes all other schools which may have program improvement needs as well. Federal vocational education legislation must not become so targeted that it is viewed as a welfare program. The nation's workers are being produced in all educational jurisdictions, not just in the poorest schools.

The basic state grant funding formula in H.R. 7 will neither serve the broad economic purpose of the federal involvement in vocational education nor guarantee that all those programs needing improvement will have access to the federal investment.

Strategic Flaw #2: Setasides

H.R. 7's funding formula abandons the concept of setasides for disadvantaged and handicapped populations. Authors of the legislation felt that a funding formula targeting funds to the poorest school districts and schools, coupled with requirements that the recipients of these federal funds assure that disadvantaged and handicapped students are being served, would make setasides unnecessary. Its more likely outcome will be to compromise disadvantaged and handicapped students' ability to access and succeed in quality vocational education programs.

Setasides are a brilliant federal strategy. They are intended to reserve a portion of the federal investment to be used only to provide special services to students who by virtue of their handicapping condition or academic deficiency are unable to participate in regular vocational education programs.

For example, a deaf student would have special funds "setaside" to purchase a hearing aid or get an interpreter so that participation in a regular electronics program would be possible. This money could only be used to treat the effect of the handicapping condition, which was preventing full participation. If a student were academically disadvantaged, for example reading three years below grade level, funds could be used to provide remediation to bring up the student's reading level and provide access to the regular vocational programs.

Once H.R. 7 funds reach the local level, they may be used for anything related to vocational education. With setasides eliminated from the legislation, special funds to meet the needs of disadvantaged and handicapped students to prepare them to participate in vocational education programs will be in competition with all the other pressures facing school districts for the limited vocational funds. This list is endless, including pressures for ... new teachers ... salaries for current staff ... new textbooks ... new equipment ... remodeling ... technological upgrading ... new curricula.

Where will the student who needs an interpreter rank in this list? The result will be that fewer handicapped and disadvantaged students will be provided the special assistance they need to succeed in vocational programs.

Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) sees the danger of this strategy clearly:

> [The] assurances contained in the bill will be meaningless unless they are implemented and monitored closely by the federal, state, and local governments. Merely counting certain groups ... for the purpose of driving the federal funds to the local level ... does not guarantee that those populations will be served with that money. For too long, I have seen the poor and the handicapped counted for funding purposes only while the actual use of the money was targeted for other groups.

Assurances may not be sufficient. Setasides are needed. They protect the funds required for special services for those students who have historically been unable to access regular vocational education programs because of their handicap or academic deficiency. Technical assistance and fine-tuning can take care of any problems that have resulted from the current Perkins Act provisions. But without the basic setaside mechanism, the disadvantaged and handicapped students who should be in vocational education programs may well get lost in the shuffle of competing local needs. There's been too much of that in the past to believe it will not happen again.

We are going to need the skilled hands and minds of every American to keep the engines of our economy running in the coming decade and beyond. We cannot spare the talents of disadvantaged and handicapped learners. H.R. 7 agrees with that. But it misses the mark when it doesn't assure that these future workers will have special funds reserved to pay for the support services that will enable them to develop to their full capacity.

Strategic Flaw #3: Academic Disadvantage

There is another problem with H.R. 7's approach to meeting the special needs of some learners. The 1984 Perkins Act recognizes academic disadvantagement for what it is—a condition that in-

hibits learning. It therefore specifies that support services are to be provided students who need treatment for this disadvantagement in order for their participation in regular vocational education to be effective. H.R. 7 drops academic disadvantagement as a key variable in the funding formula.

The reasoning is syllogistic: academic disadvantagement inhibits learning, students in poor school districts lag behind others in learning achievement, therefore all students who are academically disadvantaged are in the poor school districts. But students with learning disabilities are found among all population groups and in all school districts—urban, suburban, and rural, the well-off as well as the poor.

Federal vocational education legislation was intended to treat poverty by providing access for learners to high paying jobs. It was intended to improve vocational programs everywhere—both in poor districts and others—and make it accessible for those who need special help to succeed in these programs. If in the formula as outlined in H.R. 7 you use only a measure of economic disadvantagement, and drop the academic disadvantagement factor, the result will be such a narrowing of focus that federal funds will not get to those populations who suffer from academic disadvantagement but who happen not to be in the poorest schools.

If H.R. 7's goal of skill development for all is to be realized, then academic disadvantagement as well as poverty must trigger funding to eligible recipients. This will allow federal vocational education funds to serve a broader spectrum of students who can benefit from vocational education. And, we must remember, it is the full range of the enterprise that is needed to produce tomorrow's quality workforce.

Strategic Flaw #4: The State Role

H.R. 7 weakens the local/state/federal partnership for vocational education by reducing the state capacity to carry out its role as full partner. The states have a vital leadership role to play in assuring that the federal intent is realized at the local level. Funds provided for state administration do not foster the development of a larger bureaucracy. They serve, instead, to provide eligible recipients the support they need to carry out federal mandates.

Under provisions of H.R. 7, support for state administration will drop from 7 percent to 5 percent of the basic state grant and funds for vital statewide activities such as curriculum development, teacher workshops and data collection will plummet from 13 percent to only 5 percent. Under H.R. 7, the remaining 10 percent will be used for sex equity, displaced homemaker and single-parent programs, worthy objectives but no replacement for other types of statewide activities.

States have to be paid what it takes to do their job in responding to federal requirements. The 1984 Perkins Act allocations for that purpose are not unreasonable for the work that states must do.

H.R. 7 also overlooks the need to provide adequate federal support to the states so they can offer expert evaluation and technical assistance to local programs. Additionally, H.R. 7 bypasses the states on equipment grants and tech-prep grants. This is not a good strategy for ensuring that programs will be improved throughout the state, that special populations will be served throughout the state, or that limited funds will be put to their best and most equitable use across the state.

States must play an active role in determining where and what kind of help is most needed to improve vocational programs throughout their jurisdiction because improvement on a national scale depends on it. That's what builds the capacity of the vocational education enterprise to serve the national interest.

In every respect, the states play a crucial role in effecting change. They have to operate in partnership with the federal government and the local education agencies (LEAs) to achieve the national goals set forth in the new federal legislation. They have to be involved, they have to be participating, and they have to be given the financial and professional wherewithal to carry out these obligations. For example, let's look at one area of state responsibility where the in-place capacity can make a difference.

State monitoring of local programs should be used to trigger speedy intervention when specific indicators show that improvement in instruction is not being achieved at the local level. LEAs have a right to expect such assistance from the states. State agencies must therefore be staffed by appropriately trained, field-experienced vocational education professionals who can assess program needs and provide the technical assistance needed to meet them. Reauthorizing legislation must spell out such a role.

Strategic Flaw #5: The Federal Role

For an enterprise that is as large and diverse as vocational education, it is absolutely essential that there be a federal leadership role if national goals are to be realized. H.R. 7 offers no articulated set of expectations for the federal government. If we are not careful, in the absence of such a defined role, we are going to reduce the federal government's responsibility to one of check writing.

The Congress should direct the $5.6 million currently allocated by the federal government for salaries and expenses for the Office of Vocational and Adult Education to be used to fulfill a leadership role. There must be a carefully-thought-out and clearly-expressed role for this office.

That role has been outlined in Title I, Part A of S. 658, the AVA-supported bill for reauthorization of the Vocational Education Act. That role calls for the office to provide the states with technical assistance, perform data analysis, and provide timely program evaluations. This assistance is absolutely essential if we are to achieve the stated objectives for this $1 billion investment.

Just as LEAs have a right to expect state leadership and technical assistance in carrying out the purposes of the state grant, so too, the states have a right to expect such a role from the federal agency charged with responsibility for implementing the federal legislation. Reauthorizing legislation must therefore provide for qualified vocational education staff to carry out this important role. Anything less will seriously compromise the ability of the vocational education enterprise to meet congressional intentions.

Conclusion

As the U.S. Senate deliberates on its bill for reauthorization, we urge them to give careful consideration to S. 658, introduced by Senator Claiborne Pell and co-sponsored by Senators Kennedy, Kassebaum, and Hatch. It offers a fix for each of the flaws found in H.R. 7. As vocational educators talk to their Senators, they should urge them to support S. 658 because of its potential for achieving the national goal of preparing a competitive workforce.

The House of Representatives concurs in the belief that workforce training is one of the most urgent matters of the agenda for the last decade of this century. But the reauthorization bill it has created, while excellent in many respects, may hamper the achievement of this goal.

In summary, the bill which has currently passed the House has serious flaws which we must seek to have corrected before final legislation is enacted. For federal legislation to achieve the national objective of preparing an economically-competitive workforce it must provide for:

Program improvement funds that are equitably distributed throughout the enterprise;

Setasides that reserve monies to enable students who cannot participate in regular programs to receive services that treat the conditions hindering their participation;

Academic disadvantagement as a part of the funding formula;

State capacity building to assist and guide local implementation of the law; and

National leadership and assistance from the Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

The die is not yet cast on reauthorization. This is the time for people who care about the future of vocational education in this nation to speak out on behalf of their commitment.

AVA's legislative proposal for reauthorization of the Vocational Education Act, S. 658, offers a model that the vocational education community believes will work. S. 658 avoids the pitfalls of H.R. 7, while including many of the same provisions that are desirable in the House bill. We urge you to turn to S. 658 when asked to suggest alternative strategies for addressing key concerns.

One of the saddest lessons of history is that the noblest of goals can be subverted by the means chosen to pursue them. That must not be the fate of federal support for vocational education.